

# ***Living with an Alcoholic***

Being the partner, family member or friend of an alcoholic can seem like riding an emotional roller coaster. You're not alone: nearly 10 percent of adults have been married to alcoholics or problem drinkers, and 18 percent of Americans grow up living with one. You can begin your own recovery if you're willing to accept the reality of your situation, get educated on the facts and take advantage of support resources that are available.

## **Understanding Alcoholism**

Alcoholism is a chronic progressive disease. That means that it rarely goes away without professional help or intensive support and it tends to get worse over time. There is mounting evidence that a genetic component increases an individual's tendency to abuse alcohol. A family history of alcoholism is very common among those with drinking problems.

Social factors also can play an important role. Those who begin drinking at an earlier age are at a higher risk for problem drinking. Peer pressure among teens can have a significant influence on drinking behavior.

An alcoholic continues to abuse alcohol even after negative consequences occur, such as the onset of health problems, drunk-driving arrests, the loss of a job and breakups in relationships. Alcoholics exhibit symptoms including:

- Lack of control over their drinking: Alcoholics Anonymous defines an alcoholic as someone who cannot safely predict what will happen after the first drink;
- Increased tolerance: needing to drink more to become intoxicated;
- Physical dependence: experiencing withdrawal symptoms when one stops drinking;
- Denial of a problem: continuing to drink despite negative consequences; and
- Making excuses for drinking.

Signs that your loved one is abusing alcohol include:

- Drinking alone;
- Using alcohol to cope, relieve pain or relax;
- Feeling guilty about drinking;
- Organizing his or her life around opportunities to drink;
- Missing work or events because of drinking;
- Experiencing blackouts or memory lapses;
- Becoming moody, agitated or violent during or after drinking;
- Denying a problem despite evidence to the contrary; and
- Being unable to drink moderately once he or she begins drinking.

## **Your Role in the Disease**

Loved ones and friends of an alcoholic can pay a heavy price for the person's drinking. The alcoholic's behavior can provoke a range of emotions in those close to him or her, from anger and fear to guilt and embarrassment. Children especially can suffer because they often are ignored, abused or neglected by alcoholic parents. Many families deny the truth and hide the illness from outsiders. Some take out their anger on other family members or friends.

Typically, most loved ones and friends of alcoholics fall into two categories: enablers and helpers.

An *enabler* supports an environment that allows the alcoholic to continue drinking. Often referred to as *codependent*, an enabler sincerely cares about the alcoholic. The enabler repeatedly tries to rescue the alcoholic from his or her problems and share in the denial. An enabler often covers up for the alcoholic's

mistakes, making excuses and lies to protect the drinker from the consequences of his or her actions. Examples of enabling behaviors might include:

- Calling in sick to the alcoholic's workplace with an untrue excuse;
- Making excuses to relatives and friends to explain an alcoholic's absence or behavior;
- Covering up for an alcoholic parent who misses a child's event; or
- Prohibiting a child's friends from visiting at their home.

A *helper* truly encourages the alcoholic to acknowledge his or her illness and seek treatment. The helper learns all he or she can about the illness and seeks help himself or herself to demonstrate to the alcoholic how counseling and self-help groups can make the problem better. The helper supports the alcoholic through the stages of recovery and appreciates his or her efforts to become alcohol-free. The helper also sets limits and follows through with consequences for the alcoholic's continued drinking. Examples of helping behavior might include:

- Attending frequent Al-Anon meetings for family members of alcoholics and encouraging teen children to attend Alateen;
- Setting limits of the alcoholic's behavior and following through on consequences;
- Focusing on his or her own issues and behaviors rather than pleading or nagging the alcoholic to stop; or
- Arranging for friends and family members to participate in an intervention to confront the drinking behavior.

## **What You Can Do**

There are many actions you can take to help cope with a loved one's alcoholism:

- Accept the reality of the situation. Acknowledge to yourself that this person has a drinking problem and that you cannot change him or her. Only the alcoholic can choose to change himself or herself. However, draw hope in the knowledge that alcoholism is a treatable illness.
- Get out of danger. If the alcoholic is abusive or poses a danger to you or your family, remove yourself from the environment immediately. Call 911 in an emergency. Ask about your legal and safety options. You may be referred to a local shelter.
- Sort through your feelings. Talk to a therapist about the difficult emotions you're experiencing. Concentrate on getting help, first for your problems and then for the alcoholic.
- Get educated on alcoholism by reading up on the illness.
- Appeal to the drinker. Try to talk to the alcoholic about the problem in a calm, non-threatening manner when he or she is sober. See if the drinker is willing to admit that he or she has a problem and seek treatment. If so, assist him or her in getting help immediately.
- Consider intervention. You and your family members, friends and coworkers may decide to confront the drinker about his or her problem. During a typical intervention, those close to the alcoholic describe how that person's drinking is negatively affecting those around him or her and encourage the drinker to get help. Interventions work best when coordinated by an alcohol-abuse professional.
- Find support in others. Join a support group like Al-Anon (for family members), Alateen (for teenage children) or ACOA (for adult children of alcoholics).

Supporting a loved one in recovery from a drinking problem can be both incredibly challenging and emotionally rewarding. Alcoholism is a life-long disease. Be aware that relapses may occur following treatment, but resolve to get the help and support you need throughout the recovery process.